

So you want to be ... an anaesthetist

Why?

Did you spend 5 years at medical school to become a sleep technician...

- whose interventions have, at best, a neutral outcome on the patient's health
- whose care and protection of the helpless against knife-wielding surgeons goes entirely unnoticed
- whose job is sometimes described as 90% boredom, 10% panic
- whose private practice may mean being at the beck and call of surgeons?

Well I did, and I have enjoyed every minute of it.

To be shamefully honest, as a houseman, I probably chose it for a combination of the then-unique day off after being on call, a natural affinity for the happy relaxed members of my local anaesthetic department, a careers structure that did not require 3 years in the laboratory and the lack of clinics and ward rounds. I entered medicine to help people, and still wanted to, but I didn't want to spend hours discussing their lives.

Now, 3 years into my post as a consultant in intensive care and anaesthesia, my perspective on my chosen career bears no resemblance to my initial assessment, but, by luck it seems, I have ended up in the right speciality.

For me practising medicine has come down to three principal areas: science, physical intervention and communication (with the possible addition of making money and gaining power!). Each speciality includes these aspects in different ways and to varying extents and the key is to discover which suits you.

Anaesthesia, intensive care and pain management approach medical science in a logical and pure way. Physiology and pharmacology are taught thoroughly, from basic first principles. I understand (on the whole) why I do what I do and can see the results of my actions within minutes.

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Anaesthetists don't make vague diagnoses, we measure and monitor physiology and attempt to maintain or restore homeostasis. It is a very immediate speciality and this works for me.

However, that does not mean that there isn't room for development and expansion within the speciality. The opportunities for research are boundless – no-one knows how anaesthesia works, the world is not pain free and almost nothing in intensive care is evidence based.

If you love to cut things open then of course you should become a surgeon. However, there are plenty of challenging, often life-saving, technical skills in anaesthesia. Just think of the audible exhalation of relief from the staff when the anaesthetist arrives at the bedside of the expiring patient on the ward.

Opportunities

Once you have mastered your primary specialty what are your career ambitions? Have you got managerial aspirations? Do you fancy setting up a state of the art intensive care unit or a ground-breaking institute of chronic pain? Do you want to travel to war-torn areas with Médecins sans Frontières or fly with a pre-hospital trauma service? Or perhaps the idea of a couple of years as a senior lecturer at the University of Fiji or as a medical officer in a clinic in Nepal appeals?

Anaesthesia offers all these possibilities and many more. It is an extremely transferable skill with a uniquely flexible career path. I even have a friend who has managed to fit round-the-world ocean racing into his job plan.



The downsides?

So what of communication? Surely this is where we lose out. Well in some ways yes. Anaesthetists do not build up long-term doctor/patient relationships (with the exception of chronic pain specialists). We also receive precious little recognition for our work from the public, until something goes wrong.

However, we do meet a vast number of people and help them through one of the most frightening experiences of their lives. Many people are far more scared of anaesthesia than surgery. I believe this is not only a great responsibility but also a privilege.

The upsides

There are many other advantages to being an anaesthetist: private practice, opportunities to go into management, flirting with operating room assistants, sitting down all day, theatre banter and crosswords to mention a few, but don't be seduced by these. They may all change. Choose your speciality carefully and you will enjoy doing it, do it well, and you may even be pivotal in its future development. That is the way to be happy in your work.

Good luck! **BJHM**

KEY POINTS

- Choosing a career within medicine requires honest analysis of oneself and the specialties.
- Anaesthesia remains unsung and misunderstood.
- Anaesthesia is about minute to minute life-saving manipulation of physiology by people who understand it in depth.
- Anaesthesia offers a broad range of both clinical and non-clinical career opportunities.